THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

DOES GOD EXIST?
September 12, 1999

John M. Buchanan

God is not a supramundane being, above the clouds . . .God is not an extramundane being, above the stars . . .God is in this world, and this world is in God, the infinite in the finite, transcendence in immanence, the absolute in the relative. It is precisely as the absolute that God can enter into a relationship with the world and humankind.

Hans Kung
Does God Exist?

Before experiencing God you thought you could talk about God; when you begin to experience God you realize that what you are experiencing you cannot put into words.

Augustine of Hippo
354 A.D.

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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DOES GOD EXIST?

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Matthew 18: 21-35
Exodus 3: 1-15
"God said to Moses: 'I AM WHO I AM.'"
(Exodus 3:14)

You come in ways unexpected and unanticipated, O God. You surprise us with your lively presence; you come in human love and joy, in grief, in passion; you come in art and music; you come in the wilderness and in the city. So now, O God, you in whom we live and move and have our being, come now to us, startle us, speak your word to us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the church of my childhood God, I concluded, was somewhere behind the small door on the chancel. I was fascinated by that door. The chancel area of the church was decorated tastefully in dark wood; a center pulpit with an elegant large bench immediately behind. In the middle of the wall, just behind the pulpit bench, discreetly designed so you couldn't really tell that it was there, there was a door—a secret door! At precisely 11:00, the door would open, and the minister would emerge, the Reverend Robert E. Graham, in my childhood, a very impressive man. I loved the moment when that door mysteriously opened and out stepped Reverend Graham. I kept my eyes peeled for that moment and was severely disappointed if I missed it. In retrospect, it was the high point of public worship for me in those days.

I had been told that the church was God's house and so I came to what was a reasonable conclusion: God was behind that door.

That was pretty much it as far as my earliest theology goes. Later I would connect God with Jesus; God's Son, God's Word, God's revelation, God's incarnation. But for years, it was the space behind the door. And after saying "Now I lay me down to sleep" with Mother or Dad, in those few minutes before sleep, I recall looking up and trying to imagine God as a face brooding in the darkness. And a few years later, sitting on a hard bench on Vesper Hill at church camp—carved out of the most beautiful Pennsylvania mountain pine forest, I connected God with the magnificence of nature so that I still associate the aroma of pine with the presence of God.

I suspect each of you could recreate an early memory of God—your first theology. My memory was stimulated this summer by reading a book by Marcus Borg, Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State and author of the best selling *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time.* Borg is primarily a New Testament scholar—a Jesus scholar, a good, and sometimes controversial one. His new book is *The God We Never Knew* and he begins it with a charming autobiographical sketch of his own early faith experience.

Borg says he "grew up with God," and that the subject of God has always been him, devotionally, but also experientially and intellectually. And there's the problem. What Borg learned about God as a youngster attending a Lutheran church actually became a kind of intellectual obstacle in young adulthood—his childhood notion of God was actually getting in the way of an adult faith.

He describes that childhood faith in a way which sounded very familiar to me, and I expect to you as well. He writes:

> "I thought God meant a super-natural being 'out there,' who created the world a long time ago and has occasionally intervened in the aeons since, especially in events recorded in the Bible. God was not 'here' but somewhere else. And someday, after death, one might be with God, provided he/she had done or believed whatever was necessary to pass final judgment." (p. l)

That faith in a God out there, and believing certain ideas now in order to get to heaven later, a faith that has nourished millions of people, has quite simply, Borg says, ceased to be persuasive intellectually as the 20th century and second Christian Millenium draws to a close. "Over the past thirty to forty years, an older way of thinking about God has ceased to be compelling even to many Christians." That older faith, Borg describes as "doctrinal, moralistic, literalistic, exclusivistic, and oriented to an afterlife" (p.2).

An important part of Borg's childhood theology was his minister, Pastor Thorson. This subject, the way children sometimes identify clergy with God, makes ministers very uncomfortable. A member of a former congregation told me that she too had explained to her four year old that the church was God's house. When they settled into their pew for his first visit and the minister stood up—which happened to be me—he said, in a voice heard for several pews around, "Wow! Mommy, is that God?" "No," she said, "that's just Mr. Buchanan." "Well, where is God?" he persisted. "He's not here yet," she answered.

In any event, Pastor Thorson is part of Borg's theology. "He had gray hair, wore a simple black robe, was a big man . . .my earliest visualization of God." That's called "anthropomorphism," by the way—a human image of God. Pastor Thorson was also stern and judgmental. Borg remembers:

> "He was a finger shaker. Literally . . . he actually shook his finger at us when he preached. Sometimes he shook his finger at us while pronouncing the forgiveness of sins . . Almighty God, hath had mercy on us, and hath given His only son to die for us, and for His sake forgiveth all our sins.
>
> Those words, accompanied by a chastising finger, carried a message: Though told we were forgiven, we knew it was a close call" (p.17).

And so Borg's remote God was basically a lawgiver and judge, a childhood theology which Borg believes, and I agree, continues to dominate the image of God in the minds and hearts of many people. Anne Lamott describes one of her early images of God as "your

high school principal, leafing through your files and not being very pleased with what he finds there."

A recent Presbyterian survey on the subject of preferred images for God, conducted by our research department, asked ministers and members to rank, in order of preference, 112 different images of God. The overwhelmingly favorite mode of address is "Father," even though the respondents also indicated that they knew that God is not male. Clergy, the survey revealed, are more likely to call God Mother and Lover. Lay people are more apt to imagine God as Father, Judge and Master.

Regardless of the relative sophistication or naiveté of our images and names for God, Borg thinks we are haunted by God. Classical culture always has been and modern culture most certainly is.

Two books, recently published, are being widely read and discussed. Reynolds Price's *Letter to a Man in the Fire; Does God Exist and Does He Care?* a correspondence with a young medical student who is dying of cancer, puts the question directly. Annie Dillard's *For The Time Being* , reflects on the eternal puzzle of evil and suffering in a world created good by a loving God. And right on time, the school board of the State of Kansas brought this matter of religion and God and God's relationship to the creation into center focus in a curious decision about science curriculum in the Kansas schools which reflects a particular conservative, literalistic theology.

My first professor of theology, a lively Englishman by the name of J.S. Whale, told us about a young Anglican priest who went to his bishop for advice about preaching. The wise old bishop said, "Young man, preach about God and preach about twenty minutes." Professor Whale went on to say, "The Christian preacher has many opportunities, but one theme—the reality, nature and purpose of the living God."

And our friend, Jack Stotts, "One of the most important tasks before the church is to learn how to say 'God' in the modern world."

Scripture does not deal with the existence of God. "A fool says in his heart 'there is no God,'" the Psalmist wrote, but nowhere in the Bible is there an argument for theism—the existence of a supreme being.

What there are, of course, are stories about people—meeting God, talking to God, praying, pleading, begging, praising, and arguing with God, and sometimes even negotiating.

One of these stories—one of the oldest and best, is about Moses and the Burning Bush.

Moses, you will recall, was abandoned by his parents to save his life, rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, raised as Egyptian royalty, a rising star in the Egyptian establishment, murders an Egyptian slave master who mistreated one of his fellow Hebrews, runs for his life, meets his future wife, marries and settles down far away from Egypt, and goes into his father-in-law's livestock business.

Watching the sheep one day, he sees a bush, burning but not consumed, takes a closer look, hears a voice—'remove your shoes—I'm the God of your ancestors,' and then a plan, an outrageous scheme to free the Jewish slaves in Egypt. " . . .I have heard their cry," the voice says. "Come, I will send you to bring them out."

Moses, finally safe, happy and secure, responds as most of us would, I suspect.

"Why me? Who am I, that I should go . . .?"

"I will go with you," the voice responds

That wasn't the question, but it's the only answer he gets so Moses tries again.

"If I go, they're going to ask me 'Who sent you?' What shall I tell them? What's your name?"

And the voice says, in the most enigmatic sentence in the Bible, "I AM WHO I AM. . . .Tell them 'I AM has sent you . . .'"

Bill Cosby, I believe, was doing a routine once on this story, and when the voice rumbles "I AM WHO I AM," Moses responds, "What kind of name is that?:"

It is one of the most perplexing phrases in scripture. The name of God is the verb, "to be" repeated in the first person singular.

It can be translated:

"I AM WHO I AM,"
or
I will be who I will be
or
I am the one who is
or
I will cause to be what I will cause to be.

Some of the most careful linguists prefer:

I will be who I am/I am who I will be.

What is going on here? What is the Bible saying about God—about the fundamental question of God's existence? The great 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, advised caution when talking about the existence of God. Part of our problem, Tillich said, was that we talk about God in the same terms we use for ourselves, or a tree or a house, existing. Tillich said, God doesn't exist in a technical sense. God is. God is not a Being. God, Tillich said is "being as such." God is not part of reality. God is ultimate reality." God, Tillich taught, in a famous phrase, is "The Ground of All Being." And so theology students used to have great fun and demonstrate their erudition by praying, "Dear Ground of Being."

So there is something about this peculiar language, "I AM WHO I AM," that says be careful here. We're talking about something absolute, unlike anything else; something that cannot be totally described by human language, nor compared to anything else. What we're really talking about here is the very essence of existence—"being as such," not a bad way to say it.

And that leads to the second thing this passage says about God, namely that in order to be God to us and for us, God must remain a mystery. The ancients knew that there is a sense in which if you know the name of something you have some control over it. Jesus names the demons and casts them out. The ancient Hebrews had such a sense of God's otherness and holiness that they never pronounced God's name. In Hebrew it is four consonants. YHWH, which we do pronounce as YAHWEH, the Hebrew name for God. But they never said it. They knew what St. Augustine meant centuries later when he said, "If you think you understand God, it is not God."

Paul Tillich warned against reducing the dimension of God by talking about God's existence. Karl Barth argued for God's "wholly otherness," God's transcendence. William Placher has written a wonderful book about modern religion under the title *The Domestication of Transcendence."* Placher is afraid that awe become too cozy, too familiar intellectually, too sure of ourselves when it comes to our theology. We "domesticate transcendence."

A lot of evil—interpersonal and international, results from people, religious people, possessing absolute certainty about God and God's nature and God's will. Absolute certainty about religion leads frequently to intolerance and then oppression and finally holy war, genocide; the absolutely sincere zealot committing acts of violence and terror to rid the world of the enemies of God.

So this passage holds out for the mystery of God, but it also says three things about God which brings the matter in close.

The first is that God takes the initiative and comes to us, not exclusively, not even particularly in religious ceremonies or religious places, but in everyday life, everyday activity, everyday work and play. Moses, after all, wasn't expecting this. He wasn't out in the wilderness on a spiritual retreat looking for a burning bush. He was doing his job, carrying on, and then, tending his sheep, the bush caught fire and the voice spoke. So the word here is that God can and does come in the ordinary, that the dailyness of your life, your work, your relationships, your community, your passion, your giving of your life to people and causes you care about—that's where God is and will be present to you and for you.

So the passage asks: when does that happen for you? where is your Burning Bush experience? Have you missed it? Have you missed it because you were distracted by looking the other way, or searching in the wrong place, or were you simply so overwhelmingly busy and preoccupied that you didn't have time for it?

I have always loved something Frederick Buechner wrote:

"At its heart, I think, religion is mystical. Moses with his flocks in Midian, Buddha under the Bo tree, Jesus up to his knees in the waters of the Jordan . . . . Religion as institution, as ethics, as dogma, as social action, comes later. Religions start, as Frost said poems do, with a lump in the throat, to put it mildly, or with a bush going up in flames, the rain of flowers, the dove coming down out of the sky." (*Alphabet of Grace,* p. 74)

So what is it for you? When and where does the hidden depth of life reveal itself, the added dimension, the holy, the other, the sacred—the "Ground of Being?" When does the bush burst into flames?

When you hear music so heartbreakingly beautiful it transports you?

When you witness the extremities of our humanness; human birth, human reconciliation, human reunion, human death?

When you hold your beloved in your arms?

When you see pictures of the children, hungry, tortured, abused, and feel in your heart the violation of something that is ultimate and fundamental, something holy, sacred?

When you walk on the beach at sunrise; salt air, breezes, waves, gulls, a kind of symphony, or walking in the woods , look up in wonder and see, as poet Wendell Berry sees?

"Great trees, outspreading and upright,
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in the air
Tier after tier, a timbered choir

In fall their brightened leaves, released,
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased
To walk on radiance, amazed,
O Light come down to earth, be praised!"
A Timbered Choir (p.83)

God will come to you in ways you do not anticipate or expect—surprising ways.

The second thing the passage says about God that brings the matter close is that this is a two way conversation. God speaks—Moses has to answer. God calls, Moses responds. Moses equivocates, God won't take "no" for an answer. So expect a job to do, a task to perform, a people to be set free. If you experience this God, when God comes into your life, expect things to change, expect your life to have new meaning and purpose and direction, new frustrations, new vulnerability, new passion, new hope, new love, new tasks to do.

And the third thing is that God will be God for you.

"I AM WHO I AM. . . I will be who I will be," I think that means: I will be the God you need.

If you need someone to nurture you, to bind your wounds, and to hold you close, I will be there; I will be a mother for you.

If you need kindness and patience and strength, I will be your father.

If you need someone to talk to, to tell your secrets, your burdens and joys, I will be with you, like a sister.

If you need someone to stick by you, I'll be your friend.

If you need someone to share your hopes and dreams, I will be your brother.

If you need someone to hold you to account to all you could be, I will be your judge; a judge who loves you and wants you to be whole.

If you need someone to accept you and forgive you and affirm you, value you and esteem you and treasure you, I will be your lover.

And when you need someone to walk beside you through the valley of the shadow of death, I will be there; I will be your savior.

I AM WHO I AM.

God came to Moses on a hillside tending his sheep, as God once came to shepherds on a hillside with news of a birth, news which forever changes the conversation, bringing it as close as the child—the man—who lived and died and rose again—God with us.
Amen.

Prayers of the People
September 12, 1999
John Wilkinson

All beautiful is the march of days, loving God, when seasons come and go. Your imagination called the world into being and called it good, and your mercy nurtures each moment of each day, and each living thing in it. We thank you for the sense of a new season, filled with kickoffs and fresh boxes of crayons, filled with good memories of summer gatherings and hope-filled anticipation about the tasks ahead. We thank you that as we gather in this place, that a diverse rainbow of your people gathers across the country and around the world, praising you with many voices, in many tongues, from many traditions. We thank you that as such a symphony raises its voice, you call it into unity, common ground, a sense of shared mission and purpose, a call to serve and share and celebrate. And so for the gift of song, for the gift of poetry and drama, for painting and photograph, we thank you, for the creativity of artist and the ways which the arts deepens our relationship with you and our understanding of your world. Enhance our understanding, therefore, of a world that seems on the brink of so many challenges. We thank you for people who help us understand the difficult questions about how we get along, and ask that through our understanding we might make a difference. Where there is warfare, help us to sow peace. Where there is hatred, help us to sow love. And instill in the hearts of all those who would hate a sense of transformation, that their lives matter and are valued and therefore worthy of love. We pray for all those who feel unloved this day. We pray for those who are hungry, those who are addicted, those who are lonely. We pray for children who feel unwelcome, for men and women who feel excluded. May we live as baptism people, healed by flowing waters and therefore called to be ambassadors of your redemption. We pray for the church in all times and places, the global church, and we pray for this congregation—for children and teachers, for volunteers and committee members, for house staff and support staff and program directors and musicians and ministers. As this season now commences, give us once again your sense of vision and vocation, that at the intersection of faith and life this church may be a lively, faithful, loving adventurous outpost of your kingdom, in word and in deed. And now bind our voices as you have bound our hearts, with brothers and sisters who in many voices and in one voice have prayed the prayer taught by your son so long ago . . The Lord's Prayer.